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# **Constructing Victimhood in Divided Germany: The Case of the Association of the Victims of Stalinism (1950-1989)**

## **Introduction**

The second half of the twentieth century saw a shift in the meaning of victimhood in post-conflict situations and in the wake of democratic transitions. While the construction of victimhood in collective memory can be regarded as a 'traumatic embodiment of collective identity' (Giesen, 2004: 10), such 'trauma' is now less frequently understood in terms of a martyrdom in the service of the nation. Instead, victims of historical injustice are increasingly regarded as having suffered in the name of transnational principles of human rights (Levy and Sznajder: 2006), as 'bearers of history' (Wieviorka, 2006: 88) whose testimony plays a significant role in preventing future atrocity.

This view of the social and political function of victimhood today leaves a number of key issues unresolved, however. Primarily, it does not consider how particular groups accede to and maintain this culturally significant victim status. Recent research has pointed to the close association which is now frequently made between victim status and traumatisation, and has noted that civil society groups representing victims seek to 'translate' their experience into the language of trauma (Brunner, 2014: 52; cf. Fassin and Rechtman, 2009). Equally, such groups often make the link between the social recognition of victims' suffering and the continued health of new democratic regimes (Arthur, 2009: 334-35).

In this article, I suggest that victim status and the memory of past suffering which underpins such status have no intrinsic meaning or function in any society. Rather, these must be discursively constructed and maintained. Civil society groups which claim to represent victims have a key role to play here. While the activism of different victim groups has been analysed in terms of a 'competition' (Chaumont, 2001) for a predominant place in what Eric Langenacher has called the 'memory regime' of a given society (Langenbacher, 2010: 30-2), relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which the social and political context of such activism shapes the narratives which victim groups

formulate in order to emphasise the need for their suffering to be remembered. In order to explore the processes by which such groups seek to secure a place for their suffering in a given memory regime, I will analyse an especially long-lived victims' association, the *Vereinigung der Opfer des Stalinismus* (Association of the Victims of Stalinism, or VOS), which was founded in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1950. By paying close attention to the discursive construction of the victim role in texts produced by leading functionaries of this association, I will demonstrate the extent to which it sought to shape both victims' conceptions of their own identity and wider social and political attitudes to victims, while at the same time being itself shaped by the political and social context. This association, like other civil society groups which claim to represent the interests of victims of historical injustice, by no means represented all of those who might potentially be described as victims of the Soviet occupation and, later, of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Indeed, as we will see, the VOS's conception of the victim role and the specific form of remembrance it promoted were often subject to challenge and contestation. Nevertheless, a close analysis of this group shows that those who seek to define the social and political function of victims of historical injustice, and the ways in which their suffering should be remembered, do so in response to the circumstances of the time, confirming Ruti Teitel's observation that responses to injustice are never straightforward applications of transcendent principles, but rather dependent upon the context in which they are formulated (Teitel, 2000: 219).

### **The Case of the *Vereinigung der Opfer des Stalinismus***

The VOS is the oldest of the numerous organisations claiming to represent victims of persecution in the Soviet Zone of Occupation from 1945 and in the GDR after October 1949.<sup>1</sup> In a number of respects, this is an anomalous case in comparison with other transitional scenarios after conflict or regime change. The peculiar circumstances of German division meant that those who had suffered in the Soviet Zone/GDR and who were able to leave by various means did not regard themselves as exiles. They saw the GDR as part of Germany as much as the Federal Republic, where they and their organisation were based, and regarded their suffering as suffering in the name of Germany as a whole.

Consequently, they began early on to make claims against the West German state for financial support and other forms of recognition which, had they been in exile in a third country, would have been less easy to sustain. In other words, they did not have to wait until the demise of the GDR regime before seeking the kind of assistance, recognition and commemoration which we would normally associate with transitional scenarios. However, the shifting context of the Cold War meant that, in order to formulate their claims for such support successfully, the leaders of the VOS were frequently forced to reinterpret the meaning of victimhood and its social and political function according to the prevailing political context, repeatedly reformulating their claim that other Germans should remember their suffering. Such reinterpretations did not go uncontested, with some individual victims turning their backs on the organisation, and with the sporadic emergence of rival organisations which made different strategic choices in terms of how they framed the significance of victimhood. Despite the unusual nature of the case, the changes in the way that the VOS formulated the meaning of victimhood over several decades make this organisation an ideal example both of the contingency of victim identity on historical context, and of the ways in which civil society organisations for victims struggle to maintain the relevance of their past suffering to the wider society over time.

Andrew Beattie rightly observes that discussions of the victims of the Soviet occupation and the state socialism which followed it often portray these individuals as passive and exploited by West German propaganda, and that this view fails to give an adequate account of victims' own activism (Beattie, 2011: 127). However, Beattie's documentation of such activism in the 1950s is equally unsatisfactory, as it does not give any real sense of how victim organisations interpreted the political significance of victims' past suffering and how they made their case for the necessity of remembering that suffering in the present. The mere fact of activism tells us little about how victimhood was discursively framed by organisations like the VOS, and it does not follow that activism was immune to the contemporary political agenda. As I will show, while the VOS was able to formulate and reformulate its own conception of what it meant to be a victim of the Soviet occupation or the GDR, it did not do so under conditions of its own choosing. In fact, VOS officials' understanding of the

social and political function of remembering the suffering of victims changed in response to the wider political context, which they were forced to address in order to remain relevant to West German society at large, and to the political system in particular. The development of VOS officials' discourse around the meaning and function of victimhood, and on the necessity of preserving the memory of their members' suffering, before the fall of the communist regime in the GDR can be divided roughly into three periods, corresponding closely to the different phases of the Cold War itself: from the era of confrontation and 'rollback' (circa 1948-1961), to the era of co-existence and détente (circa 1961-1981), and the renewed confrontation which gave way to the Glasnost period (circa 1981-1989).

### **The VOS in an Era of Confrontation**

The VOS emerged in a context in which numerous anti-communist organisations, largely based in West Berlin, claimed the right to represent the interests of victims of the Soviet occupation and the emerging regime of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (Socialist Unity Party of Germany, or SED) in what was to become the GDR. The best known of these were the *Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit* (Fighting Group Against Inhumanity, or KgU) and the *Untersuchungsausschuß Freiheitlicher Juristen* (Investigatory Committee of Free Lawyers, or UfJ), both of which received funds and advice from the American secret service operating in West Berlin (Murphy, Kondrashev and Bailey, 1997: 107-115). However, these organisations were not primarily led by those who had been persecuted under the Soviet occupation or in the GDR, nor did they aim to be mass membership organisations for such victims. In fact, the KgU, the most controversial of these groups, was led by two men (Ernst Tillich and Rainer Hildebrandt) who considered themselves to be victims of the National Socialist regime (Greiner, 2010: 345), and who argued that the failure of Germans to resist the NSDAP gave them a special moral responsibility not to repeat the same mistake with the equally totalitarian SED (Merz, 1987: 67). The UfJ and the KgU collected information about the crimes of the Soviet occupiers and the SED regime, and distributed their findings among Germans in East and West, on the assumption that awareness would strengthen Germans' will to resist.

This approach was very much in line with the wishes of the United States. Although many West Germans did not believe that the GDR would last, there was a marked tendency in the immediate post-war years, to regard the Cold War as a matter for the two super-powers, over which ordinary Germans had little influence (Creuzberger, 2008: 459). While the emphasis on 'liberation' of peoples in communist-run states, also known as 'roll-back', only became official American policy from 1952 under President Eisenhower, Bernd Stöver has pointed out the extent to which Truman's 'containment' policy of the immediate post-war period actually foreshadowed many elements of Eisenhower's stance, which were simply pursued with more vigour under the successor administration (2002: 25-26). From 1948, when Tito's break with Moscow appeared to demonstrate that individual states could potentially be levered out of the Soviet sphere of influence, the US increasingly emphasised the necessity of winning over the populations of communist states in the hope that they would throw off their oppressors (Stöver, 2002: 198).

From 1949, the policy of 'roll-back'/'liberation' also became the official position of the newly formed Federal Republic, and of its *Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen* (Federal Ministry for All-German Affairs, or BMG). This ministry took over funding of the UfJ from the US in 1950, and also funded (and in some cases instigated) numerous further anti-communist initiatives designed to maintain Germans' sense of national unity and undermine the SED regime in the East (Friedel, 2001: 49; Kreuz, 1980: 21). Anti-communism was a common denominator of political culture in the early Federal Republic (Major, 1997: 258), and the three major West German political parties ran *Ostbüros* (Eastern Offices) which similarly sought to support those who rejected the domination of the SED in the GDR, encouraging a spirit of resistance to a regime which, at the beginning of the 1950s, none of them expected to last long (Buschfort, 2000: 62).

This focus on 'liberation'/'roll-back' with regard to the GDR provided a ready-made discourse with which organisations representing various groups of Germans who had suffered as a result of the lost war and the Soviet occupation could frame their experience in terms of a socially and politically relevant victimhood. For instance, Michael Schwartz has argued that organisations of expellees,

representing Germans who had been forcibly removed from territories in Poland and Czechoslovakia, came to understand the meaning of their experience in predominantly anti-Soviet terms under the influence of the Adenauer government (2014: 169). With the VOS, we can see a similar adoption of ‘liberation’ rhetoric.

The main publication of the VOS, *Die Freiheitsglocke* (The Liberty Bell) gives a clear sense of the discursive strategies employed by officials of the organisation (who largely authored the articles printed here) in order to emphasise the contemporary relevance of their membership’s past experiences. Indeed, the very title points to an allegiance with American liberation policy (Stöver, 2002: 383). The bell in question was a representation of a copy of the Philadelphia Liberty Bell which had been funded by 16 Million US citizens on the initiative of former US Military Governor, General Lucius D. Clay. Clay had then taken the bell on a tour of 26 German cities in 1950, before ending his ‘Crusade of Freedom’ at the Town Hall of Schöneberg, where the bell still hangs today (Berlin.de, undated).

In the early years of the VOS’s existence we can observe how officials from the organisation both drew on and re-purposed ‘liberation’ rhetoric to their own ends. Writing in 1951 in the *Freiheitsglocke*, Georg Duwe (a member of the organising committee of the VOS) complained that, in the period since 1948, despite the ‘sacrifice’ of his ‘comrades’ in the service of ‘Europe’s struggle for freedom’, the ‘political capital’ represented by their suffering and that of their families had not yet born any ‘dividends’ to the benefit of the victims themselves (Duwe, 1951: 3). It should be noted that other organisations such as the KGU and the UfJ tended to see the suffering of the victims of the Soviet occupation and the GDR as politically useful in terms of their propaganda objectives, and did not focus their energies on providing support for those victims once they had arrived in the Federal Republic or West Berlin. Here the VOS, which saw itself not only as an organisation publicising abuses in the East, but also (and perhaps even primarily) as offering support to those who escaped, clearly attempted to piggy-back the issue of material compensation and support for victims onto the existing ‘liberation’ agenda.

Although the VOS did not receive state funding until 1958, its primary goal in the early 1950s was to establish a compensation scheme for victims who had fled to the West. Throughout this period, officials of the VOS were keen to emphasise that their contribution to the policy of ‘liberation’ in relation to the GDR was not being sufficiently recognised, that is to say that their past suffering, while considered useful, was not being suitably rewarded after the event. In this context, the decision of Adenauer’s government in 1952 to offer compensation to Israel and the Jewish Claims Conference for the Holocaust provided an opportunity for Wilhelm Kalweit, another member of the VOS committee, to highlight the lack of compensation for victims of Stalinism:

This difference in the value attached to the different sacrifices made appears to create the impression that the fight against Stalinism is a matter of secondary importance, that it does not have the same significance as the fight against Hitler.

And yet this impression is contradicted by the generous resources devoted to the prosecution of the Cold War. This generosity, sadly, does not extend to the victims who have fallen in battle. They are left like worn-out millstones on the edge of the battlefield. [Sic, DC]<sup>1</sup> (Kalweit, 1952: 1)

Leaving aside the more dubious aspects of the argumentation put forward here, including the implication that victims of the Holocaust were heroically sacrificing themselves in the fight against National Socialism, it is clear that the key strategy of VOS officials was to emphasise their members’ contribution to the state’s agenda in terms of policy towards the East, exploiting it as a kind of moral capital which might be used to leverage financial compensation. The activism of the VOS, then, explicitly draws on the dominant discourse of ‘liberation’, while also exploiting that discourse in the service of its own goals.

These arguments also had a secondary function in terms of the organisation’s understanding

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from the German are the author’s own.



of the category of victim itself. From the end of the Second World War until the fall of the GDR regime, the nature of oppression in the Soviet Zone and the GDR changed considerably, and different individuals were affected in different ways at different times. It has been and remains a key difficulty for an organisation such as the VOS, which claims to (at least potentially) represent the interests of all victims, to accommodate these varied experiences under a single definition of victimhood. As the very first issues of *Die Freiheitsglocke* show, such discussions were already a feature of the organisation's early history.

The organisation had been founded by a group of men released from the Sachsenhausen internment camp in 1950 (Siegmund, 2003: 49). Sachsenhausen's inmates at the time were largely those sentenced by Soviet Military Tribunals (SMTs). While early on in the occupation those convicted by SMTs were often Nazi party members or supporters of the regime, entirely innocent Germans, especially young people, were also convicted of resisting the Soviet occupation on flimsy evidence. From 1948, as the SED tightened its grip on East Germany with Soviet support, SMTs were frequently used as a means of persecuting members of political parties who resisted the SED's claim to power (Erler, 1999: 206-209). Alongside this already complex group, the potential victims of Stalinism also included those arrested and interned following the Soviet occupation, who were not subject to trial. This practice lasted only until the end of 1946, but many remained interned until trials were organised in 1950. Lutz Niethammer argues that, unlike those interned in the western zones of occupation, those interned in the Soviet zone were more often low-ranking party members, since the Soviets tended to place former SS, SA and concentration camp personnel in prisoner of war camps (Niethammer, 1999: 107-108). Nevertheless, in both categories of internee, it is clear that there was significant presence of those who had supported the Nazi regime.

Those writing in the *Freiheitsglocke* clearly perceived the presence of some (not especially high-ranking) Nazis among the victims of internment as a potential problem in terms of their collective assumption of victim status. Here again we see an instrumentalisation of the anti-communist rhetoric of 'liberation', with the internees transformed in retrospect into 'freedom fighters'

whose commitment to the anti-totalitarian cause transcends their implication in another totalitarian regime. In the second issue of *Die Freiheitsglocke*, a very likely pseudonymous Erdmann Greifenstamm proclaims:

we can say with complete conviction that nobody [who was interned, DC] came back a Nazi. The rough hand of fate has reformed these individuals better than any de-Nazification could have done. It has changed their way of thinking and has given them a conviction which sadly not everyone in our Fatherland possesses.

These people have become the sworn enemies of any form of dictatorship.  
(Greifenstamm, 1951: 1-2)

In a similar vein, Peter von Ketschendorf implies that a refusal to acknowledge the suffering of former members of the NSDAP who were interned by the Soviets would waste their potential value as resisters to the new regime:

Splitting hairs in this way will not create any freedom fighters. In the Soviet concentration camps, we experienced how a shared danger can bring together people who were once divided by politics. Deprivation and death behind barbed wire brought the socialists, conservatives and liberals together with National Socialists, who proved themselves as men and as human beings.  
(von Ketschendorf, 1952: 2)

In this view, the internment experience allows for the overcoming of old political divisions in a shared fight against dictatorship. This new union of ‘freedom fighters’ was supposed to allow former Nazis to shake off their responsibility for the old dictatorship by committing themselves to fighting the new communist oppression, at the same time as it allowed the VOS to propagate a shared victim identity based on resistance to Soviet occupation and SED rule, very much in line with the discourse of

‘liberation’ which dominated government policy at the time.

By the late 1950s, however, the viability of a strategy of ‘roll-back’ or ‘liberation’ became increasingly unconvincing. Following the suppression of resistance to Soviet domination in the GDR itself (1953) and later in Hungary and Poland (both 1956), the US and the Federal Republic became increasingly resigned to the status quo with regard to communist regimes in eastern and central Europe, a process which culminated with the ‘end of illusions’ represented by the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 (Stöver, 2002: 805; 810). At the same time, by 1957, the Soviet Union was itself emphasising the need for peaceful co-existence with the West.

This change of circumstances was explicitly acknowledged in *Die Freiheitsglocke*, and there was consequently a notable shift in the discourse by which VOS officials sought to make clear why it remained important for West German society to remember the suffering of its members. Rather than framing the commemoration of the victims’ suffering as a contribution to resistance to the communist regime in the GDR, officials writing in the magazine began to focus on the necessity of defending democracy within the Federal Republic, among a population deemed to be increasingly comfortable and de-politicised in the wake of West Germany’s ‘economic miracle.’ The implied danger here was that such a population would no longer be in a position to resist anti-democratic (that is to say, communist) forces who might try to undermine the political system in the West. For example, in 1957 VOS official Susanne Sievers emphasised the ‘responsibility’ of former political prisoners

to be an active element in the politics of the Federal Republic which pricks the conscience of the well-fed. The victims of Stalinism must be the yeast in the great bread of our people, shaking its will to freedom and independence awake, keeping alive its sense of responsibility for that freedom. (Sievers, 1957: 10).

What we see here is a re-invention of the notion of containment by the VOS leadership, as the prospect of ‘liberation’ in relation to the GDR becomes ever more distant. In this discourse, which is

maintained well into the 1960s, the sacrifice of those who suffered at the hands of communists in East Germany is figured as a reminder to ‘well fed West Germans’ with their ‘refrigerators, television cabinets, holidays in Italy, cocktail parties and abstract art’ that they must not forget their duty to defend the ideals on which democracy is founded (von Koss, 1962).

A similar strategy is at work in the presentation of a volume of poems financed by subscription by VOS members. *Ihr steht aber im Licht* (But You Stand in the Light, 1962) collected poems by former internees and political prisoners who had fled the GDR, most of whom were amateur writers. The title of the volume itself implicates non-victim readers directly: They are regarded as standing in the light which is denied to the persecuted. This expression is taken from one poem which urges the reader not to forget the sacrifice of the victims, and – although many of the pieces simply describe experiences of suffering with little commentary – others draw heavily on Christian imagery of martyrdom. For example, there are references to the ‘path to Golgotha’ (Pförtner and Natonek, 1962: 82) and drinking from the cup (84). In addition, one whole section of the book is entitled ‘Gerufen und erhört’: Literally ‘called and answered’, which is possibly a reference to Isaiah 49, 8 (‘In the time of favour I will answer you’). This section is taken up exclusively with poems which are inspired by Christian religion, and a frontispiece shows skeletons behind barbed wire, some of whom appear to be rising up from the dead, with a background of crosses (173); in the sky, we see a crucified figure, presumably Christ. Just as Christ died to save the world in Christian theology, the introductory material to the volume makes clear, so the victims of communist oppression ‘have sacrificed themselves in the name of the free world’ (22). This emphasis is telling, in that the suffering of the victims is no longer understood as a sign of resistance likely to contribute to the overthrow of the communist regime in the GDR, but rather as an experience which has somehow contributed to the preservation of freedom in the West. The presentation of the victims as Christ-like martyrs and the address of the collection’s title suggests a call to West German readers to remember the victims’ suffering and to emulate them in their defence of democratic freedom.

Again, this shift in rhetoric was not only designed to maintain a sense that the victims’ past

suffering was still relevant to West German society more widely, but can also be understood as propagating a coherent victim identity to bind individual members to the organisation. The challenge for the VOS was no longer simply a matter of creating a victim category which made sense of heterogeneous experiences, but rather a matter of encouraging those who might potentially regard themselves as victims of the communist regime in the East to maintain that identification, and to remain loyal to the VOS itself. The danger of the 'well fed' society of the economic miracle to the VOS as an organisation was not only that the victims might seem less relevant to ordinary West Germans with their largely materialistic and parochial concerns, but that individual victims themselves might join the ranks of the complacent. Addressing the General Assembly of the association in 1964, Chairman Hans-Joachim Platz highlighted this apparent de-politicisation of victims:

The rust of contentment is also eating away at the former political prisoners. With a fatter belly came also a sense of being more comfortable, with a return to economic security and relative wealth came also a sense of indifference towards the problems of society. (Platz, 1964)

What lay behind this concern was at least in part a recognition that, once integrated into West German society, many members left the organisation and were no longer interested in regarding themselves as victims whose past experiences had left them with a special responsibility to play a political role in West German society. This trend was surely facilitated to an extent by the compensation scheme introduced in 1955, the Prisoners Support Act (*Häftlingshilfegesetz*, or HHG), on which the VOS had campaigned. The Act offered social payments to former political prisoners from the GDR, and many were able to establish a new life in the Federal Republic with this assistance, potentially making them less likely to engage in further activism in the context of the VOS. However, the HHG was not framed as a compensation scheme as such, nor did it provide a regular and ongoing income. The VOS therefore continued to campaign for more substantial financial support, which

necessitated maintaining a sense of the continued social and political relevance of the victims, not only in terms of making the case for more generous provision to the government, but also in terms of motivating their own increasingly disinterested constituency.

As Platz made his appeal to members to remain politically active, first signs of a decline in membership were making themselves felt. The VOS rarely published membership figures, but recorded 23,000 in September 1963. By September 1968, however, it had only around 10,000, representing only one seventh of the number of former political prisoners living in the Federal Republic; and in 1973 the *Freiheitsglocke* was only being printed in a run of 4,000, a number of which would have been made available to institutions and relevant politicians, not only to members. It seems clear from this sharp decline that those who might potentially have seen themselves as victims of state socialism either no longer regarded themselves in those terms, or were no longer attracted to the version of victimhood propagated by the VOS.

### **The VOS in the Era of Peaceful Coexistence**

While the transition to a 'normal' life in the Federal Republic may be one cause for victims' growing disinterest in the VOS, I would argue that we can see a cleavage opening up between officials and activists of the organisation, on the one hand, and the broader membership, on the other, which can be explained by officials' refusal to adopt new strategies in the face of political change. The sharp decline in membership particularly in the later 1960s and into the 1970s can at least in part be explained by the leadership's initial reluctance to adjust their position in response to the emergence of peaceful coexistence as a favoured strategy on the part of the United States, and in relation to the emergence of the *Ostpolitik* promoted by Willy Brandt, first as Foreign Minister and then as Chancellor. Karl Wilhelm Fricke, a journalist who, as former political prisoners himself, remained one of the foremost commentators on human rights abuses in the GDR and who was a significant figure within the VOS, acknowledged the difficulty of this new situation in his introduction to a volume of autobiographical texts which the organisation published in 1967: 'There may well be

voices who believe that the experiences documented here had been better not published for the sake of understanding between the two Germanys' (Fricke, 1967: 5). Those voices were heard particularly within government. When Social Democrat Herbert Wehner took over the Ministry for All-German Affairs in 1966, he soon expressed his mistrust of the VOS as irresponsible Cold War warriors (Creuzberger, 2008: 491).

The VOS leadership's initial response to this change of mood was to resist the agenda of détente and *Ostpolitik*. For over a decade it found itself in the invidious position of instinctive opposition to a policy of rapprochement with the regime which had persecuted its members, while at the same time recognising that many of its goals as an organisation, not least that of securing more substantial compensation for victims, were dependent on the good will of the political establishment in the Federal Republic, where a broad consensus on the necessity of de-escalating tensions with the East was emerging. The VOS leadership's refusal to reformulate its position may also have been influenced by the views of those victims who chose to remain members, who tended to express bitterness with the new political status quo. Their view was summed up in May 1967 by the Chairman of the Mannheim group of the VOS, who was quoted in the regional newspaper *Badische Zeitung* critiquing the new tone in the Federal Republic's policy towards the GDR:

It was the mood of the Cold War which indirectly contributed to the action we have taken. And today we are regarded in many circles as an unwelcome reminder of the official policy of the 1950s. (Stelling: 1967)

In the autumn of that same year, Gerhard Beyer of the VOS wrote directly to Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger expressing the disappointment of VOS members, but also making clear the potential link between the apparent end of the victims' political usefulness and the inadequate compensation which was still at the heart of the organisation's concerns. Insisting that 'we are no Cold War warriors', he noted that, in relation to failed attempts on the part of the VOS to have the HHG revisited, 'the current

political situation and the social situation of our members leaves many with the feeling that we no longer have a place in the political landscape of the Federal Republic.' (Bayer, 1967: 5)

In the years that followed, different approaches to a re-definition of the social role of victims were mooted within the VOS leadership, with a particular focus on the rise of left-wing radicalism during and after the student movement of the late 1960s. As Gitta Bauer's contribution to the general assembly of the VOS in March 1968 demonstrates, for example, this search for a sense of purpose was closely linked with the potential decline in the contemporary significance for wider society of remembering victims' experiences:

In my view, our society can ill afford – as this time of confusion, and the relativisation of all values – to do without a group of people who have been hardened in the fires of terror and oppression. We do not want to written off as belonging in the past, people with whom one at most has pity, but whose political views one believes one can simply push to one side. (Bauer, 1968: 1-2)

Nevertheless, it became clear that such a re-orientation, attempting to install victims of the communist regime in the GDR as moral authorities qualified to be taken seriously on broader social and political matters, would have little purchase with the politicians on whom the VOS relied to achieve its specific goals. In the intervening decade, the VOS and its officials failed to arrive at a convincing alternative narrative in terms of the positive social and political role of victims, or on the importance of maintaining the memory of their suffering in West German society, and largely held fast to opposition to détente with the East. There is evidence that this position contributed to increasing losses in membership, with some voicing their rejection of the VOS's apparently uncompromising position. Clearly, not all those who had been victims of oppression in the GDR regarded *Ostpolitik* as anathema (Reese, 1974).

The difficulties which the new political status quo caused for the VOS were resolved at least



temporarily when the organising committee which had continued to run the organisation in the Cold War tradition was replaced by officers offering an alternative platform in April 1978. The then editor of *Die Freiheitsglocke*, Eberhard Reese (real name Sigurd Binski), set out the need for a change in direction in highly pragmatic terms:

The VOS cannot simply represent one position on relations between the German states. It needs both the opposition and the government on its side. [...] Because nothing we want to achieve can be achieved without the government. (Reese, 1978)

It is notable that the title of the general assembly of the VOS where this change of direction was inaugurated took the motto 'Freedom and Human Rights'. This foreshadowed a shift in the VOS discourse about the social and political role of victims which allowed the organisation to adopt a position which remained critical of the GDR and demanded that the suffering of its victims should not be forgotten, while at the same time keeping within the bounds of what the organisation clearly felt was acceptable from the government's point of view.

Again, this new strategy was not purely an innovation of the organisation itself. As Samuel Moyn has pointed out, the notion of human rights as standards to which states could be held by the international community, as opposed to principles whose implementation was an internal matter for sovereign states alone, emerged in the 1970s at least in part as a response *détente* between the super-powers. Within the framework of peaceful coexistence, the West could apply pressure on communist states for their failure to uphold human rights without framing such critique in terms of an attack on their political system as a whole (Moyn, 2010: 121–75). President Jimmy Carter, who quickly became a hero figure for the VOS (Göhl and Rothenbacher, 1977), was at the forefront of this development. However, the invocation of human rights was also compatible with West German *Ostpolitik*, which hoped to use rapprochement with the GDR as a means of applying pressure to the communist regime to ease some of its more repressive measures towards the East German population. Negotiations in

the context of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, leading to the signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975, were an important expression of this approach.

Although the VOS had begun to adopt the term human rights as a slogan before the leadership change of 1978, this focus became central in the years following this tactical shift. Addressing members in December of that year, the new Chairwoman of the VOS, Jutta Giersch, set out this human rights agenda:

It remains a primary responsibility of the VOS to work tirelessly and visibly for the cause of human rights in eastern Germany, however difficult others may find it to hear that message.  
(Giersch, 1978)

Despite Giersch's presentation of the VOS's position as potentially controversial, in the context of the times this new interpretation of the role of victims was clearly designed to allow for activism within a politically acceptable framework. In other words, it allowed the VOS to oppose the regime in the GDR, while at the same time avoiding 'a course of hard confrontation with the Federal government' (Reese, 1980: 1).

### **The VOS in the 1980s**

In this era, the VOS was not alone in West Germany in its attempt to employ the discourse of human rights for the anti-communist cause. Indeed, some felt that the VOS was not nearly militant enough in terms of its approach to human rights issues in the GDR. Some of these figures, such as Eberhard Göhl and Wulf Rothenbächer, who had been voted out as Chairs of the VOS in 1978 in favour of Giersch and her supporters, or the author Siegmund Faust, found an alternative forum in the *Internationale Gesellschaft für Menschenrechte* (International Society for Human Rights, or IGFM), originally founded in 1972. This controversial organisation was often criticised for emphasising human rights abuses in communist-run states while downplaying the crimes of right-wing regimes

such as that in South Africa (Kuck, 2000), and, although claims that it was a neo-fascist front were unfounded (Wüst, 2000: 13), the IGFM can certainly be regarded as an organisation drawing support from anti-communist and conservative circles, in opposition to the generally more left-liberal Amnesty International. Indeed, the focus of what became the IGFM's German section before the fall of the Berlin Wall shows a strong concentration on case work related to the GDR, especially as regards cases of GDR citizens who had applied to be released from their citizenship and to re-settle in the West. By 1989, the IGFM was dealing with over 3,000 such cases per year (IGFM, no date: 1). In the early 1980s, the IGFM received considerable criticism from the government, in particular from SPD Minister for Inner-German Relations Egon Franke, for its very public campaigns for the release of these applicants and of political prisoners (Wüst, 2000: 75). The government had established discrete channels of communication with the GDR regime to secure the release of individuals, not least through the system of payments offered for the release to the West of those deemed to be political prisoners. However, this discretion, which the GDR demanded for such negotiations, was undermined by the IGFM and the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft 13. August* (Working Group 13<sup>th</sup> August), an anti-communist organisation founded by former KdU Vice-Chair Rainer Hildebrandt, both of which used their work with former prisoners to collect information on human rights abuses in the GDR and disseminate it to the press (Wölbern, 2014: 372).

Activists within the IGFM clearly understood their work in terms of bringing the communist regime in the GDR to an end and promoting the eventual re-unification of Germany. In this sense, they represented a return to the 'liberation' strategies of the 1950s. By the early 1980s, under the influence of US President Ronald Reagan, this notion appeared (at least at the rhetorical level) to be in vogue once more, and the IGFM made a clear link between the publicising of the crimes of the communist government in the GDR and the need to strengthen Germans' readiness to shake off the post-war status quo. Rothenbächer, writing in the IGFM's magazine *DDR heute* (GDR Today) in 1987, for example, called on West Germans to form a 'Reunification Movement' and pointed to the West German government's refusal to react publicly to human rights abuses in the GDR as one reason

why such a movement was failing to emerge (Rothenbächer, 1987). Similarly, the organisation *Hilferufe von Drüben* (Calls for Help from Over There, or HvD), which emerged from a series of television broadcasts on the situation of those persecuted in the GDR by conservative journalist Gerhard Löwenthal, supported the IGFM's approach, making links between the 'traditional silence of the government of the Federal Republic' and the 'destruction of the Germans' sense of belonging together' (Löwenthal, 1979: 2). For Löwenthal and his supporters, the publicising of the suffering of those whose human rights were abused in the GDR was therefore a means of creating empathy which would transcend German division.

Jan Philipp Wölbern argues that the conflict between such conservative-nationalist groups and the government hinged on whether the GDR could be encouraged to respect human rights in exchange for the financial support of the West, while maintaining discretion on both sides, or whether greater respect for human rights in East Germany could be forced through spectacular publicity (2014: 391). However, what Wölbern overlooks is the extent to which such groups regarded the cause of victims of the communist regime as a means to achieve the more important goal of the fall of the SED regime and German unification. Although, with the advent of Helmut Kohl's Christian Democratic-Liberal coalition in 1982, the atmosphere of hostility to the government lessened (Wölbern, 2014: 391-392), this basic premise of these groups' activities remained unchanged.

The VOS, on the other hand, having initially taken up the human rights agenda, remained more circumspect, avoiding the IGFM's and HvD's more publicity-oriented approach. As a result, some within the IGFM and HvD came to regard the VOS as (at best) well-meaning, but out touch and ineffectual (Schmidt, 1988: 11); at worst as too cosily arranged with the Federal Ministry for Inner-German Relations which provided its funding (Löwenthal, Kamphausen and Clausen, 2002: 208). These competitor organisations certainly had the advantage that they were able to secure sufficient funds privately, and so did not have to rely on the Ministry, but it is also worth noting that – despite the presence of some former political prisoners from the GDR among their ranks – neither the IGFM nor HvD regarded themselves primarily as victim organisations in terms of their membership.

Whereas VOS officials sat on the compensation board created to administer the HHG, the funds for which had to be regularly replenished by the government, neither of these rivals were interested primarily in victim compensation. However, HvD did collect and distribute funds for newly released GDR citizens arriving in the West.

Despite initially taking up the cause of human rights in the late 1970s and early 1980s, *Die Freiheitsglocke* soon showed a waning in this interest, perhaps in reaction to the successful activation of the topic by its rivals. What discussion of the social and political role of victims does take place in its pages before the fall of the Berlin Wall focuses on their ability to warn against the dangers of left-wing politics in the Federal Republic itself, although it is not made clear how that warning will be communicated, except within the pages of *Die Freiheitsglocke* and at the organisation's own meetings. Following the return to power of the Christian Democrats in 1982, the VOS could allow itself to return to a stronger anti-communist line, as long as it did not disrupt the policy of the government towards the GDR, which was marked by a strong degree of continuity with the period of 1966 to 1982, when Social Democrats had been part of the ruling coalitions. The 1980s offer a picture of a largely stagnant organisation which was struggling to formulate a convincing narrative about its social and political purpose or about the necessity of remembering the suffering of victims of the GDR in contemporary West Germany. Instead, it fell back instead on tried-and-tested formulations in what increasingly appeared to be a conversation with itself.

The end of the SED regime opened up new possibilities in terms of a revised settlement on compensation for victims to augment the HHG (Clarke, 2012) and other issues around victim commemoration. This took place in the context of extensive efforts in post-unification Germany, driven by the political system, to develop an appropriate framework for remembering the GDR as Germany's 'second dictatorship' (Clarke and Wölfel, 2011). This new memory regime pushed victims of the Soviet Occupation and SED rule back to the forefront of national memory in a way that victim organisations had not experienced since the 1950s, creating a range of new possibilities, but also new constraints for victim organisations which go beyond the scope of this article (cf. Siegmund, 2003;

Rudnik, 2011; Clarke, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

As noted at the beginning of this discussion, the example of the VOS as a victims' organisation is an anomalous one in the context of the study of democratic transition, in that – due to the peculiar circumstances of German division during the Cold War – it was able to be active and press political demands both before and after the end of the regime which it opposed. Nevertheless, the unusual nature of these circumstances are also an advantage in terms of examining the VOS as an example of how civil society groups which seek to represent victims and maintain their place in the memory regime of a given society are forced to construct the meaning of historical suffering differently over time in response to the shifting political context in which they operate. This example suggests that such groups, whether in the German context or elsewhere, are not merely passive fodder for propaganda produced by states or politicians, but rather seek to formulate their own understanding of the contribution that victims and the memory of their suffering can make to wider society. However, this struggle to make sense of victims' continued relevance will always be closely linked to the need to garner political support from mainstream parties who are likely to influence the levels of material or symbolic recognition which they can achieve for their members in post-transition society. So, while not merely passive, victim organisations are not able to choose the context in which they make sense of their members' past suffering and press for its commemoration: they need to respond to the interests and agendas of the political class in particular and attempt to accommodate themselves to these as far as possible.

I have also shown how this process of constructing the victim role is necessary to create a coherent sense of common cause to bind individual victims to the organisation. In some cases, accommodation to an external political agenda, because it promises wider recognition and a sense that past suffering is not being forgotten, can be useful in terms of promoting such an identity. However, because victims of past injustice are clearly not a homogenous group who unquestioningly

accept the role proposed to them by organisations such as the VOS, the danger of disengagement or fragmentation into splinter-groups is clearly ever-present, particularly when political circumstances change and it becomes difficult to formulate a response to those changes which can form the basis of a workable consensus among all of those who might regard themselves as victims about how their suffering should be remembered. What this analysis has also shown, however, is that the formulation of the category of victim by civil society organisations like the VOS, and their assignment of a social and political function to the memory of suffering in relation to historical injustice, shares a basic feature of all attempts to come to terms with human suffering, namely that ‘it takes place within a cultural struggle to constitute our lives with positive meaning’ (Wilkinson, 2005: 41).

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<sup>1</sup> The VOS is a campaigning membership organisation, which from 1958 received subsidies from the West German state (Creuzberger, 2008: 491). It has maintained regional and local groups as well as a headquarters in Bonn and, following German unification, in Berlin, with a national committee.

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